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Moving on up: new geographies of apartment dwelling in Ramallah, Palestine

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Context and outline of the study

This pilot study formed the first part of a more extensive investigation into how everyday life practices are shaping the recent growth of the urban conurbation Ramallah - Al Bireh - Beitounia (hereafter Ramallah), and how these practices are entangled with broader political and economic processes. The growth of Ramallah can be traced historically back to the 19th century and then more recently to the influx of Palestinian refugees after 1948. However, this project takes as its starting point the more recent and rapid increase in the city's population during the last two decades. While the Oslo Accords established Ramallah as the political centre of the Palestinian Authority in the mid 1990s (and contributed to the movement of Palestinian political life away from Jerusalem), the intensification of the Israeli Occupation after 2000 saw Ramallah emerge as the undisputed economic centre of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Factors responsible for this change include the building of the Occupation Wall and legislation preventing Palestinians from working in Israel, the spatial fragmentation of the West Bank through the imposition of checkpoints, closures and continued land theft by the Israeli regime, and the concentration of foreign aid in Ramallah-based non-governmental organisations and Palestinian Authority institutions. This project takes these factors as an important context for understanding the lives of migrants currently living in Ramallah. However, this research begins from the premise that it is also important to understand how everyday life practices are shaping the growth of the city, and interacting with these broader contextual factors.

The specific focus of this pilot research project was to examine the effects of migration to Ramallah on social relations with family and neighbours. The research was based in the neighbourhood of Umm Shariyat, a residential area of mainly apartment buildings, where a large number of migrants from other Palestinian cities in the West Bank and Jerusalem have recently settled, (many since 2003). The researcher lived in a newly constructed apartment building and conducted participant observation and interviews for two months in July and August 2010. Due to the limited time spent in the field and the gender of the researcher, most of the people formally interviewed were men between the ages of 24 and 50. While the results of this pilot study are limited to this gender and neighbourhood profile, they do indicate areas where further research is required.

[Insert Harker1.jpg here. Caption: 'The banal face of urbanization in contemporary Ramallah']

Preliminary findings and implications:

There were three main findings from this pilot research project. These tentative conclusions explore the geographies of social relations for migrants, the role of

migration in reshaping the city of Ramallah and the ways in which migrants themselves experience and think about the city.

1. Extended families and distant neighbours

Many, if not most Palestinians who have moved to Ramallah in the last ten years, come from contexts where they have strong social networks. These networks consist of people who not only live close to each other (spatial proximities), but are also frequently related to each other (family relations). When people move to Ramallah they maintain good relationships with their families in their place of origin, through daily telephone conversations and weekly or twice weekly visits to their place of origin. However, few migrants have got to know their 'new' neighbours in Ramallah very well, beyond occasional forms of interaction that result from living in close proximity to one other (e.g. passing on stairs). These patterns of socio-spatial experience could be crudely summarized as a binary between family (spatially distant, socially close) and neighbours (spatially close, socially distant). Some social relations (family) become stretched across space, while some spaces (apartments in Ramallah) are experienced as less social. Further research on this particular issue will explore women and children's social relations, since they may not conform to this pattern.

2. Rethinking the city

Due to the policies and practices of the Israeli Occupation that have fragmented Palestinian space in the West Bank, Ramallah is currently thought about as a bounded space in various ways. Labels such as Bantustan, enclave and bubble are used to describe the enclosed and isolated nature of the city. The development of Ramallah as the political and economic centre of the West Bank has also created a very different urban environment from other Palestinian cities. However, this research project has shown that Ramallah is also connected with those cities and villages through the lives of migrants. The movement of people, money, knowledge, and goods (esp. food) between Ramallah and other parts of the West Bank (e.g. through weekly visits, telephone calls, financial transfers) suggests that the city can be thought of as a series of emotional, social, economic and political networks that stretch across the West Bank. While the spatial metaphors of enclosure mentioned above describe an important part of the urban experience – its disconnection from other places – there are also geographies of connection that must be taken into account. More generally, this finding points to a way of thinking about cities not only as bounded territories (e.g. of buildings and infrastructure), but also as flows (e.g. of peoples and social relations).

3. Political economy and affective atmospheres

It is clear that migrants' experiences of Ramallah must be understood in the context of the changing political and economic relations outlined earlier in this report. However, their experiences also exceed these processes in important ways. In particular, migrant experiences must also be understood in relation to what is here termed the atmosphere of the city, or a broader structure of feeling that cannot be captured or appreciated by quantitative research. Many research participants talked about an atmosphere of 'freedom'. For different people this meant: 1) freedom from familial & social obligations; 2) freedom to make money;

3) freedom from the Israeli Occupation. It was clear that all of these understandings of freedom were interlinked to create a broader atmosphere of freedom in Ramallah. This atmosphere is actively produced in various ways by the Palestinian Authority, the municipalities and by residents themselves, although much more research is needed to establish more precisely how these processes quite literally take *place*. However, it is clear from this pilot project that in addition to the political and economic factors that make Ramallah distinct, an atmosphere of freedom also defines Ramallah.

More information about future research that will be developed these ideas can be found at: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/staff/geogstaffhidden/?id=7668>